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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 000044

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EUR/SE, EUR/CARC

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/09/2018
TAGS: PREL PGOV GG RS TU
SUBJECT: TURKEY'S CIRCASSIANS DEMAND FREEDOM TO TRAVEL TO ABKHAZIA

REF: A. 08 ANKARA 2181
¶B. 08 SECSTATE 134559
¶C. 08 ANKARA 1635

Classified By: POL Counselor Daniel O'Grady, reasons 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. Representatives of an estimated six million Circassians living in Turkey are demanding the right to travel to Abkhazia directly, potentially complicating Turkish efforts to maintain restrictions on direct travel and adopt further measures to isolate Abkhaz de facto authorities (refs A and B). Representatives of the Circassian community are warning the government that Circassian citizens will make their views known at the ballot box in upcoming municipal elections if the "embargo" is not lifted. Circassian representatives maintain that Turkey is losing influence and prestige in Abkhazia as a result of the travel restrictions, driving the region further into the arms of Russia. A resumption of the ferry connection between Sukhumi and Trabzon and/or a flight between Sukhumi and Istanbul would have a big impact, according to our contacts, encouraging further Abkhazia's western orientation. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) We met recently with Federation of Caucasian Associations (KAF-FED) General Coordinator Cumhur Bal. KAF-FED is an umbrella federation representing about 80 Circassian associations in Turkey. Turkey, he estimates, has a Circassian population of about six million (see ref C). Apart from advocating measures to protect Circassian cultural and linguistic rights, such as Circassian-language programming on the state-owned TRT network, the Circassian community's highest priority, he told us, is lifting the "embargo" on direct travel to Abkhazia. Ensuring that Abkhaz leaders, namely "President" Bagapsh, are not prohibited from traveling to Turkey is another key priority.

¶3. (C) According to Bal, representatives of the Circassian community are warning the government that Circassian citizens will make their views known at the ballot box in upcoming municipal elections if the "embargo" on direct travel to Abkhazia is not lifted. The government, Bal said, is denying its citizens basic freedom of movement. Presently, Turkish citizens must apply for a transit visa from Russia to travel to Abkhazia. (Previously they had been entering Russia on a tourist visa and then traveling on to Abkhazia.) He questioned why Turkey, which was not party to the CIS, implemented the CIS sanctions in 1995, terminating the Trabzon-Sukhumi ferry and effectively proscribing direct travel to Abkhazia, while Russia, which had been legally bound to impose those sanctions, issued visas for Turks to travel there. The embargo is demeaning, said Bal, and diminishes Turkey's prestige and influence in Abkhazia. A

resumption of the ferry connection between Sukhumi and Trabzon and/or a flight between Istanbul and Sukhumi, would have a big impact, encouraging further Abkhazia's western orientation, he maintained.

¶4. (C) Bal said he knows that GOT recognition of Abkhaz independence is unrealistic at this stage, but insisted that Turkey's Circassians remain committed to it in the long-run. Abkhazia, he argued, meets the criteria of statehood: a defined community, historical boundaries, functioning institutions, and a representative government. He recounted dramatically the tragic, historical narrative underpinning Abkhazia's independence claim, emphasizing Abkhazia's battle-won sovereignty, and blaming President Saakashvili and his two predecessors for "killing" the possibility of union with Georgia. But he did not rule out completely a future modus vivendi with Georgia. He posited that any Abkhaz decision to partner with Georgia would have to be arrived at from a position of sovereignty and that, for this to happen, Georgia would need to become a trustworthy country. This, he insisted, was impossible under Saakashvili.

¶5. (C) Asked how Circassians in Turkey reconcile the argument that Turkey should increase its outreach to Abkhazia in order to diminish Russian hegemony there, while at the same time applauding Russia's stance in the region, Bal said he is under no illusions about Russian intentions, knowing that Russia will "want to play the game" with Abkhazia. But the Abkhaz people, he said, have been left without options. Abkhazia's independence is viable, he maintained, unlike South Ossetia's. He said he fully expects South Ossetia to



join the Russian Federation and does not oppose this strongly. The division of North and South Ossetia was a Stalinist measure that should be undone, similar to the decision to attach the Abkhaz nation to Georgia.

COMMENT
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¶6. (C) After decades of rigid state policies (now beginning to crack) aimed at promoting Turkish national identity, language and culture, Circassian identity in Turkey remains limited, despite the community's large numbers. There is little evidence that Turkey's six million Circassians, including the 500,000 estimated to be of Abkhaz origin, constitute a defined voting block formidable enough to alter fundamentally GOT policy on as sensitive an issue as support for Georgia's territorial integrity and stability in the Caucasus. Indeed, above any aspirations for greater cultural and linguistic rights, Circassians are known for their patriotism, and, as a broadly secular and affluent community, are not aligned with the ruling Islamist-oriented Justice and Development Party (AKP). However, Circassians are increasingly making their voices heard, limiting, we believe, Turkey's capacity to implement additional measures, such as travel bans (refs A and B), aimed at isolating Abkhazia's de facto leaders.

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Jeffrey